

Adorno on Sibelius

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Theodor W. Adorno's short, trenchant critique "Glosse über Sibelius" has gained significance in Sibelius criticism out of all proportion to its length. First published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1938, and reprinted in *Impromptus* thirty years later, it was written at a pivotal point in Adorno's life: the year he emigrated to the United States, after having been resident at Oxford's Merton College since 1934, when he was forced to flee Germany because of the rise of the Nazi regime. The critique is closely contemporary with other of his key articles on musical aesthetics, including "On the Fetish-Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" and his "Social Critique of Radio Music," similarly concerned with what Adorno believed was the parlous state of art music composition and the decline of popular musical taste. Adorno's attack was prompted by the 1937 publication of Bengt de Törne's eulogistic biography, *Sibelius: A Close-Up*. But it must also have been motivated by the impact in the UK of other recent writing, such as Constant Lambert's *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (1934) in which Sibelius's work was paraded as the paradigm for modern composition.

The focus of Adorno's criticism, as Max Paddison explains in his essay in this volume, is the ideology of the nature imagery with which many of Sibelius's supporters associated his work. The claim for the "natural order" of Sibelius's work, and its associations of profundity, seriousness, and aesthetic autonomy, applauded by writers such as Lambert, Cecil Gray, and Ernest Newman, was deeply problematic for Adorno. Sibelius's apparent reliance on such naïve pictorial imagery constitutes an attempt to conceal what Adorno perceives as the technical inadequacy of his musical language and its failure to engage critically with the social context in which it was created and consumed. For Adorno, this signals a fundamental failure of artistic responsibility.

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Adorno's essay also raises the issue of Sibelius's reception in Germany during the Third Reich—not least given the prevalence for essentialist metaphors of blood and soil that fueled the regime's extreme racist ideology. This in turn prompts the question of the degree to which Sibelius was himself aware of such political appropriation, and may even have been party to such thinking. Sibelius does not appear to have openly expressed sympathy for far right-wing political movements in the way that Knut Hamsun did during the 1940s, and though he accepted the Goethe Medal in 1935 on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, he did not travel to Germany to collect the award in person. Sibelius's position throughout the Second World War (during which Finland fought both the Red Army, and later the retreating German forces) was at times ambivalent or unclear, but no documentary evidence survives that definitively links him with Fascist tendencies.¹ Sibelius's pithy diary entries of 9 August and 6 September 1943, written during the darkest days of the war—"The question of Origin does not interest me. . . . These primitive modes of thought, anti-Semitism, etc., I can no longer accept at my age"—are deeply inconclusive, as Tomi Mäkelä observes.² Sibelius's most culpable offense during the conflict, it seems reasonable to assume from the surviving evidence, is that whenever possible he attempted to maintain an aloof distance from political events. For some scholars, this remains an open question.³

For Adorno, however, the musical materials themselves are already deeply politicized, and the central thrust of his essay becomes the extent to which Sibelius's music perpetuates a regressively conservative worldview under the guise of a formless elementalism. Adorno's aim is therefore wider than the simple critique of Sibelius's music implied by his essay's title: "Glosse über Sibelius" becomes part of a broader analysis of contemporary musical culture, one as much concerned with patterns of listening and reception as with the supposed technical shortcomings of Sibelius's work. It is a defense of the New Music—especially of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, whose work was under particular attack in Germany in the late 1930s—but it is simultaneously a challenge to unmediated notions of creativity and being-in-place. In its insight and philosophical ambition, Adorno's "Glosse" and his note on Sibelius and Hamsun, translated below, remain continually provocative.

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To anyone who has grown up in the Austro-German musical sphere, the name of Sibelius does not say much. If Sibelius is not conflated geographically with [Christian] Sinding, or phonetically with Delius, then he is familiar as the composer of *Valse triste*, a harmless bit of salon music, or of filler pieces that can be encountered in concerts, such as *The Oceanides* or *The Swan of Tuonela*—shorter pieces of program music with a rather vague physiognomy that is difficult to recall.

But come to England, or even America, and the name begins to become boundlessly inflated. It is dropped as frequently as the brand name of an automobile. Radio and concerts resound with the tones of Finland. Toscanini's programs are open to Sibelius. Long essays appear, larded with musical examples, in which he is praised as the most significant composer of the present day, a true symphonist, a timeless non-modern and positively a kind of Beethoven. There is a Sibelius Society that is devoted to his fame and busies itself bringing gramophone records of his oeuvre to market.

You become curious and listen to a few of the major works, for example the Fourth and Fifth symphonies. First you study the scores. They look skimpy and Boeotian, and you imagine that the secret can only be revealed through actual hearing. But the sound does nothing to change the picture.

It looks like this: a few "themes" are set out, some utterly unshapely and trivial sequences of tones, usually not even harmonically worked out; instead, they are *unisono*, with organ pedal points, flat harmonies, and whatever else the five lines of the musical staff have to offer as a means of avoiding logical chord progressions. These sequences of notes are soon befallen by misfortune, rather like a newborn baby who falls off the table and injures its back. They cannot walk properly. They get bogged down. At some unpredictable moment the rhythmic movement ceases: forward movement becomes incomprehensible. Then the simple sequences of notes return; all twisted and bent, but without moving from the spot. The apologists consider these parts to be Beethovenian: out of insignificance—the void—a whole world is created. But they are worthy of the world in which we live; at once crude and mysterious, tawdry and contradictory, all-familiar and impenetrable. Again, the apologists say that precisely this testifies to the incommensurability of a master of creative form who will accept no conventional models. But it is impossible to have faith in the incommensurable forms of someone who obviously hasn't mastered four-part harmony; it is impossible to think of someone as far above the school who

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uses material that is appropriate for a schoolboy but simply does not know how to follow the rules. It is the originality of helplessness: in the category of those amateurs who are afraid to take composition lessons for fear of losing their originality, which itself is nothing but the disorganized remains of what preceded them.

On Sibelius as composer one should waste as few words as on such amateurs. He may have made a considerable contribution when it comes to the colonization of his fatherland. We may easily imagine that he returned home following his German composition studies with justified feelings of inferiority, quite conscious that he was destined neither to compose a chorale nor to write proper counterpoint; that he buried himself in the land of a thousand lakes in order to hide from the critical eye of his schoolmasters. There was probably no one more astonished than he to discover that his failure was being interpreted as success, his lack of technical ability as necessity. In the end he probably believed it himself and has now been brooding for years over his eighth symphony as if it were the Ninth.

What is interesting is the effect. How is it possible that an author achieves world fame and a kind of classicism—albeit manipulated—who has not merely lagged completely behind the technical standard of the times—for precisely this is what is considered good about him—but who fails to live up to his own standards and makes uncertain, even amateurish use of the traditional means, from the building materials to the large constructions themselves? Sibelius's success is a symptom of the disturbance of musical consciousness. The earthquake that found its expression in the dissonances of the great New Music has not spared the old-fashioned, lesser kind. It became ravaged and crooked. But as people flee from the dissonances, they have sought shelter in false triads. The false triads: Stravinsky composed them out.⁴ By adding false notes he demonstrated how false the right ones have become. In Sibelius, the pure ones already sound false. He is a Stravinsky *malgré lui*. Except that he has less talent.

His followers want to hear nothing of all this. Their song echoes the refrain: "It's all nature; it's all nature." The great Pan, and as needed Blood and Soil too, appears promptly on the scene. The trivial is validated as the origin of things, the unarticulated as the sound of unconscious creation.

Categories of this kind evade critique. The dominant conviction is that Nature's mood is bound up with awestruck silence. But if the concept of "Nature's mood"⁵ [*Naturstimmung*] should not remain unquestioned even in the real world, then surely not in works of art. Symphonies are not a thousand lakes, even when riddled with a thousand holes.

Music has constructed a technical canon for the representation of nature: Impressionism. In the wake of nineteenth-century French painting, Debussy developed methods for expressing the expressionless, for cap-

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turing light and shadow, the color and the half-light of the visual world in sounds that go deeper than the poetic word. These methods are foreign to Sibelius. *Car nous voulons la nuance encore*⁶—this sounds like a mockery of his muted, stiff, and accidental orchestral color. This is no music *en plein air*. It plays in a messy schoolroom, where during recess the adolescents give evidence of their genius by overturning the inkwells. No palette: nothing but ink.

Even this is reckoned as an achievement. On the one hand Nordic profundity is supposed to become intimate with unconscious Nature—without, on the other, taking frivolous pleasure in her charms. It is a cramped promiscuity in the dark. The asceticism of impotence is celebrated as self-discipline of the creator. If he has a relationship with Nature, then it is only inwardly. His realm is not of this world. It is the realm of the emotions. Once arrived there, you are released from all reckoning. If the emotional content is as indeterminate as its foundation in the musical events themselves, this is seen as the index of their profundity.

It is not. The emotions are determinable. Not, it is true, as they might prefer, in terms of their metaphysical and existential content. They have as little of this as Sibelius's scores. But in terms of what is unleashed in the scores. It is the configuration of the banal and the absurd. Each individual thing sounds quotidian and familiar. The motives are fragments from the current material of tonality. We have already heard them so often we think we understand them. But they are placed in a meaningless context: as if one were to combine indiscriminately the words *gas station, lunch, death, Greta, and plowshare* with verbs and particles. An incomprehensible whole made up of the most trivial details produces the false image of profundity. We feel good that we can follow from one thing to the next, and are pleased, in good conscience, while realizing that in actuality we don't understand a thing. Or: complete non-understanding, which constitutes the signature of contemporary musical consciousness, has its ideology in the appearance of comprehensibility produced by Sibelius's vocabulary.

In the resistance to advanced New Music, in the mean-spirited hatred with which it is defamed, we hear not just the traditional and general aversion to the new, but the specific intuition that the old means no longer suffice. Not that they are "exhausted," for mathematically the tonal chords certainly still permit an unlimited number of new combinations. But they have become mere semblance, un-genuine: they serve the transfiguration of a world that has nothing left to transfigure, and no music can lay claim to being written, any more, that does not present a critical attack on what exists, down to the innermost cells of its technical methodology. This intuition is what people hope to escape by means of Sibelius. This is the secret of his success. The absurdity that the truly depraved means of traditional

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post-Romantic music take on in his works, as a result of their inadequate treatment, seems to lift them up out of their demise. That it is possible to compose in a way that is fundamentally old-fashioned, yet completely new: this is the triumph that conformism, looking to Sibelius, begins to celebrate. His success is equivalent to longing for the world to be healed of its sufferings and contradictions, for a “renewal” that lets us keep what we possess. What is at stake in this kind of wishing for renewal, what is equally at stake in this “Sibelian” originality is revealed by its meaninglessness. This lack of meaning is not merely “technical,” any more than a sentence without sense is merely “technically” devoid of meaning. It sounds absurd because the attempt to express something new using the old, decayed means is itself absurd. What is expressed is nothing at all.

It is as if for the autochthonous Finn all the objections ginned up in reaction to cultural Bolshevism were coming into their own. If reactionaries imagine that the new music owes its existence to a lack of control over the material of the old music, this applies to none other than Sibelius, who holds fast to the old. His music is in a certain sense the only “corrosive” one to emerge from our times. Not in the sense of the destruction of the bad existing, but of a Caliban-like destruction of all the musical results of mastery over nature that were sufficiently hard-won by humanity in its handling of the tempered scale. If Sibelius is good, then the criteria of musical quality that have endured from Bach to Schoenberg—a wealth of relations, articulation, unity in diversity—are done in once and for all. All that Sibelius betrays in favor of a Nature that is nothing but a tattered photograph of the familiar apartment. For his part he contributes, in art music, to the great degradation at which industrialized music easily outdoes him. But such destruction masks itself in his symphonies as creation. Its effect is dangerous.

Footnote on Sibelius and Hamsun

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Translator's note: Adorno wrote this brief text in connection with Leo Lowenthal's 1957 essay "Knut Hamsun. On the Prehistory of Authoritarian Ideology" (Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung 6). It was printed as a note to the following sentence by Lowenthal: "If the poverty of the cultural inventory and the shadowy quality of the people in his works are interpreted by readers and critics as a sign of particular modesty, mature austerity, reverential reserve toward Nature, and 'epic grandeur,' then what is expressed in this kind of encomium of the writer is a tired resignation, a social defeatism" (338).

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The same tendency can be observed in a strictly technical sense in the symphonies of Jan Sibelius, which are of Hamsun's ilk in their material construction as well as their effect. Here one should think not only of the vague and at the same time coloristically undeveloped "Pan-like" nature mood, but of the compositional methods themselves. This type of symphonic style knows no musical development. It is a layering of arbitrary and chance repetitions of motives whose material, in itself, is trivial. The resulting appearance of originality is ascribable only to the senselessness with which the motives are put together, without anything to guarantee their meaningful context other than the abstract passage of time. The obscurity, a product of technical awkwardness, feigns a profundity that does not exist. The constructed opaque repetitions lay claim to an eternal rhythm of nature, which is also expressed by a lack of symphonic consciousness of time; the nullity of the melodic monads, which is carried over into an unarticulated sounding, corresponds to the contempt for humanity to which an all-embracing Nature subjects the Hamsunian individual. Sibelius, like Hamsun, is to be distinguished from Impressionist tendencies by the fact that the all-embracing Nature is prepared from the dessicated remains of traditional bourgeois art, rather than being the primal vision of a protesting subjectivity.

NOTES

1. For a summary, see D. G. Kirby, *Finland in the Twentieth Century: A History and an Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 106–47.

2. Tomi Mäkelä, "Poesie in der Luft." *Jean Sibelius. Studien zu Leben und Werk* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2007), 43.

3. The issue is examined exhaustively in Ruth-Maria Gleissner, *Der unpolitische Komponist als Politikum: die Rezeption der Jean Sibelius im NS-Staat* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002); as well as in Mäkelä, "Poesie in der Luft." More recently Timothy L. Jackson has reopened the question of Sibelius's sympathies during the war in his chapter in *Sibelius in the Old and New World: Aspects of His Music, Its Interpretation and Reception*, ed. Timothy L. Jackson, Veijo Murtomäki, Colin Davis, and Timo Virtanen (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009).

4. In German: "auskomponiert."

5. In German: "Naturstimmung."

6. French in the original. The quotation, which concludes "Pas la couleur, rien que la nuance" ('Because all we want is greater nuance/Not color, but rather nuance'), is from the fourth verse of Paul Verlaine's symbolist poem "Art Poétique" (from *Jadis et naguères*, 1884), beginning "De la musique avant tout chose!"

7. English in the original.